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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, minority students were interviewed about the competition they felt in their high school. Purposes of the study were to investigate whether African American and Mexican American students engaged in academic competition, to describe their subjective experiences of competition in high schools, and to describe their responses to competition. Thirty-one participants in the Toledo (Ohio) EXCEL program, a scholarship incentive program for minority groups, and 10 students in a comparison group were interviewed. Most students reported competing for grades. Competition was usually based on grade point average and on grades on individual tests. Students tended to choose with whom to compete in a way that created an optimal level of challenge, and they tended to focus on grades rather than learning. Positive and negative consequences of competition are explored. One table describes student characteristics. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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Academic Competition Among African American and Mexican American Students: A Qualitative Study

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Academic Competition Among African American and
Mexican American Students: A Qualitative Study

Competition or a focus on demonstrating competence by performing better than other students has been attacked by various motivation researchers including Nicholls (1989), Ames (1992), and Covington and Omelich (1984). These researchers describe two major motivational goals, first, some variation of ego goal which reflects a desire to demonstrate ability by performing better than others, and second, some variation of task mastery goal which reflects a desire to master a skill. Research has shown mastery goals to be more adaptive than ego goals (Ames & Archer, 1988; Covington & Omelich, 1984; Graham & Golan, 1991; Meece & Holt, 1993; Nolen, 1988).

Researchers have suggested that deleterious effects of ego/competitive situations most affect people who hold low perceptions of ability and that task mastery situations are most beneficial for those same people. For example, Nicholls (1989) stated, "Individuals with high perceived ability will behave similarly whether ego- or task-involved. Personally challenging tasks will be chosen in each case" (p. 109). He also wrote, "Ego involvement produces lower performance in individuals of low perceived ability and equal or higher performance in those of high perceived ability" (p. 127). Covington and Omelich (1984) asserted that "slow learners will profit more from a task-oriented structure than will fast learners" (p. 1040). Bergin (1995) found that students with lower grade point averages scored higher on a test in a task mastery goal situation than in a competitive situation.

Most studies of goal orientations have used quantitative indicators of goals and outcomes and have either not specified the ethnicity of participants or have had predominantly White participants. In her review of research on motivation in African Americans, Graham (1994) commented that little or no research has focused on mastery and ego goal orientations of African Americans. In addition, while many have bemoaned the emphasis on competition in schools, little

or no research has documented specific forms of competition, what students make of it, or how students use it.

Minority students competing for grades is of particular interest because minority students have lower grades, on the average, than majority students. In fact, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) have described African American students who avoid academic achievement in order to avoid being accused of acting white. In this qualitative study, minority students were interviewed about the competition they felt in their high school. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether African American and Mexican American students engaged in academic competition, to describe their subjective experience of competition in high school, and to describe their response to competition.

Method

Study Participants

Forty-one students were interviewed for this study. Thirty-one were participants in the Toledo EXCEL program, and 10 were in a comparison group. We will briefly describe EXCEL, then the comparison group. Fifty eighth-grade students are selected each year to participate in Toledo EXCEL, a scholarship incentive program for students from groups underrepresented in higher education. In order to be eligible, at the end of 8th grade they must be at grade level on standardized tests, have a B average, and be nominated by a teacher or counselor. Benefits of the program include summer institutes and field studies (for example, field studies have been conducted in the Civil Rights South [Bettis, Cooks, & Bergin, 1994], Ghana, and Taxco, Mexico), academic tutoring during the school year, and a scholarship to the University of Toledo. Admission to the program is not based primarily on income, so family incomes vary widely. Students come from public and private schools throughout Toledo, a medium size predominantly White (about 70%) Mid-Western city.

At the beginning of the second year of the program (the cohort that applied for EXCEL in 1990 and among the seniors in Table 1), students who qualified for the program were admitted by random assignment. Random assignment was used that year because there are no tested criteria for

telling what kind of students are more "deserving" or what kind of students would benefit most from a program like EXCEL. It was considered that if only highly able students were selected, they might have successfully gone on to college without an elaborate program, although research suggests that even highly able high income "minority" students often drop out well before college even becomes an option. If only marginal students were selected, they might fail for lack of preparation.

Students were selected for interviews from the first 3 EXCEL groups and from the comparison group. They were not selected randomly, but were selected to provide diversity in gender, ethnicity, achievement, and year of graduation. Sixteen students were male and 25 female. The EXCEL students were not paid for their participation. The non-EXCEL students were paid $20 for their participation. Relevant data concerning the students, including gender, ethnicity, and high school grade point average (GPA), are provided in Table 1.

Interviews

The 41 students were interviewed regarding high school and family experience. EXCEL students were also asked about EXCEL. Interviews took 1 to 1 1/2 hours and were transcribed. The interview was semi-structured; thus every student was supposed to be asked about the same issues, but interviewers were free to follow up on responses as seemed appropriate to the circumstances. All but 6 of the interviews took place in students' homes; 8 of the interviewers were African-American and 1 was White. The interviewers included one professor, one graduate student, and six parents. Parent interviewers were trained by the researchers and paid a modest stipend. Followup sessions were held with parent interviewers to assist them in dealing with the interview process. Because our intent was to describe personal, subjective experience, and because the followup questions varied by interviewer, interview responses were not quantified (Patton, 1990). In a separate paper, we describe the same students' responses to issues of ethnic identity and acting white (Bergin & Cooks, 1995).

Computation of Grade Point Average

It is important for the reader to know that all the schools included in our sample computed GPA on a 4 point scale for "average" classes and on a 5 point scale for Honors and Advanced Placement classes. No one could get a perfect 5.0 GPA because Honors classes are not offered in all classes; however, averages of 4.4 or 4.5 were possible, and we heard one report of a 4.8. This grading scheme of course affects student aspirations:

Int: Did your grades get any better after you started thinking about going to college?

9: Yes.

Int: How much better?

9: About two points. I went from a 3.9 to a 4.1 in one year. I'd always gotten the 4-point, because I was in Honors Classes, but last year is the first year I started really getting A's in my Honors Classes to get the true 5-points.

Int: So, before you were satisfied with a B in the Honors Classes?

9: Right, because I knew I'd end up with a 4.0 anyway.

Thus, when that student just wanted good grades, and a 4.0 meant an A average, earning a B in an honors class was the same as earning an A in a regular class. However, when she became concerned about earning scholarships, and for other students when they began competing, a mere 4.0 was no longer good enough. In fact, we heard reports of students being careful to sign up for honors band and honors choir, in schools where they were offered, more to inflate their GPA than for any love of music. The more classes you take that have a 5 point scale, the higher your potential GPA. Of course you must earn an A or it doesn't make any difference.

Results

Did the students compete?

Most of the students whom we interviewed reported competing for grades. Table 1 presents a list of the participating students, whether they perceived academic competition in their schools, and whether they personally competed for grades (for those students who were asked that

question). It is important to keep in mind that all of our respondents were students of color, who are sometimes portrayed as underachievers who avoid academic achievement.

Students seemed to equate honors classes with competition. For example, Keri Boykin stated

30: I was in mostly honors classes, and in honors classes, there's always competition. Everybody trying to be at the top. So, it was always competition.

Joseph Ford, at the same school, stated:

29: Yeah, we compared grades and everything and made sure we were within the status quo for the honors students, you know. The top 10 people, you get to be friends with those people. Those are the people you are in class with and everything and help each other with homework and everything. So, it was less competition as everybody helping each other get through the courses, more or less.

Int: But, you were monitoring other people's grades?

29: Correct. And, making sure I was in there, and if somebody started to get ahead a little ways, everybody would grab hold and say, "All right, what are you doing different to let you get the better grades?" Then, we'd all catch up. So, it's kind of hard to get ahead, but it's possible.

An African American woman at a predominantly White school stated:

20: Well the classes I'm in are like strictly honors and A/P. So we compete amongst ourselves.

Basis of Competition

In order to be able to compete, students must have some basis for comparison. Competition appeared to be based on two major pieces of data. The first was grade point average (GPA). Interviewees who were doing well were very aware of their GPA. Charita Noble (10), who was in an all-female private school, stated, "Well this past quarter I had a 4.16 but my cumulative was a 3.5 so if I can get my, if I can hold my B. I just want to keep my B right now in precalc. My GPA — if my other classes go well — will be about that 4.16 again. That will bring up my cumulative." Students' grade cards included a computation of the semester GPA as well as cumulative GPA. In addition, Dean's Lists in many of the schools were publicly displayed with names listed in order of GPA, though GPA was not typically included on the sheet. However, students easily found out each other's GPA by asking or by listening to the grapevine. The second

piece of data was grades on individual tests. Students who were competing asked each other their grades on tests and compared scores. A third but less important piece of data was awards.

A student at an expensive, elite private school reported a somewhat different basis for competition — intelligence — but relied upon standardized test scores and grades for support as to who was most intelligent:

13: Yeah, there is some competition for grades. It's not very important. People do compare themselves to other students. In fact, fairly often, but also one thing about this school is part of the competition isn't grades, but who's more intelligent, which is kind of strange.

Int: Tell me about that.

13: People who are sort of proven to be more intelligent, or the smartest kid in their class, are sort of elite. The kids who get the best SAT scores, the kids who have the highest grades, the kids who are head of the class are considered kind of elite. There was a girl last year, who was a senior last year, she was absolutely brilliant. She was the smartest person probably that this school had seen in a while and was recognized for it, and everybody was like just "Wow!" It's just considered important to be intelligent here. Part of that is because, I think, good grades are sort of taken for granted. Everybody gets C's and B's. To get A's is just — I don't know, that's just like the city of gold. It's just the biggest goal.

One student pointed out both GPA and awards as sources of data for competition:

26: They have like—let's see, how can I put it. There's a lot of competition between students, say who got the best GPA and all that, and then they have like banquet awards and try to get the incentives that the administrators might give you for having the best GPA.

A highly competitive student (25), Selena Sanders, was asked what would happen if schools did not provide data like computed GPA. She thought that students would compute their own:

Int: Let's say they never computed any GPA, and they never published any rankings in class, do you think that would change competing — get rid of it, reduce it?

25: It would reduce it. Let me see. The people that went to high school, like I did, they would have nothing to look forward to except college. I mean, you'd just be there doing work and be totally bored, because I'd be totally bored if I didn't have that interest. On the other hand, I guess it would be good for those that were just getting by.

Int: Okay, but going back to you, you said you'd be bored and so forth. Do you think you and your friends would find other measures?

25: Something else? Yeah, definitely. I don't know what it would be.

Int: Like what?

25: Okay, let me think, what would it be? So, would they grade tests?

Int: Yeah. You'd still have grades; they just wouldn't tell you what your GPA was, your cumulative GPA, your rank in class.

25: We'd do it ourselves.

Int: You think?

25: We would do it ourselves. I'm sure.

Competing at an Optimal Level of Challenge

Not all students competed, but most in our sample did (see Table 1). However, it is important to note that they tended to choose whom to compete with in a way that created an optimal level of challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Malone & Lepper, 1987). The following quote illustrates how one student's competition was influenced by the desire to select an optimal level of challenge. Daniel Smothers (37) described his competition with Samuel Jackson (39); he was asked whether he *only* competed with Samuel Jackson. Daniel stated that he competed with other students in the EXCEL program: "I mean other *male* EXCEL students. The girls, they own their own level so to speak, you know? You can compete with them, but most of them will beat. I mean they were just there." He stated he was relieved that a certain female EXCEL student did not go to his high school: "She was so smart. She was the smartest EXCEL student." That would have been too much competition; he apparently would have felt obligated to compete with her because she was a Black EXCEL student, but he did not want to. Nor did he want to compete with smart White girls: "I mean I had to compete with girls, but they were usually the little White girls trying to be the Valedictorian and who knows what else. Trying to be so smart. I didn't get up to that level because I really didn't overapply myself." Thus students tended to select competitors so they have a chance to do well, and they tended to be very specific about whom they were competing with. In most cases the competitors were also good friends.

Some competed at the top, like Joseph Ford, who was quoted above. Selena, who applied but was not admitted to EXCEL, also competed at the top and was very specific about her competitors; she listed 6 students by name and stated:

25: In my group of people, my group of friends, it went on all the time. It went on until we graduated. My friend and I, we were neck and neck for who was going to be valedictorian.

When she was asked whether she competed with EXCEL students (one of whom, Tiffany, was student 20), she said she did not because their grades were not high enough:

Int: So, did you find yourself competing with those people [EXCEL students] in particular, sort of to prove yourself?

25: Not really, because they weren't in my range.

Int: So, you were beating them already?

25: Right.

Int: Without putting an extra effort.

25: Right.

Int: Did you find yourself monitoring them?

25: Oh yeah. I knew what they had. Yeah, Tiffany graduated with like a 3.4, and so did Richard Barnett, and Jamal Willis was 3.1 or something, if I remember right.

At the time of the interview, Selena was attending a historically Black college, where she was struggling to keep her grades up. She made a statement that highlighted her attempts to maintain an optimal level of challenge in terms of competition:

25: The people around my dorm, I really don't associate my grades with because we're all in two different majors. But, the people in my class, I've just been trying to get help — every time I know someone got an A on the test, I go to them, and they help me whatever they can do. So, I'm really not worried about grades right now. I'm trying to understand what I'm doing.

Int: So, it sounds like almost you don't believe in competing—

25: Unless I know I'm going to win? Something like that?

Int: Well, I wasn't going to say that, but go on.

25: I won't compete unless I know I'm capable of competing, and right now, I'm not.

Int: Okay. So, in situations where you're not capable of competing, do you sort of quit?

25: No. I'm trying to get my information together so I can. That's all. See, I would have continued to be in it [competition] if I would have been in the top of my class at my college right now, but since I'm not, I'll just wait. Then, after I establish myself, then wherever I'm at, I'll just start moving up.

Students who were not themselves competing still noticed who competed with whom. For example, Sonia Perez was asked whether there was much competition at her school:

14: Between the top 10 people. I'm probably 30th in my class. That's not as good as I could do, I realize. I notice between the top 10, and a lot of people in the honors classes, there's a lot of competition between who has the highest GPA. We have people in my school with a 4.8 — 4.83. He's got all honors classes and has A's in all of his honors classes. Between those people, the top 10 people, they all have above a 4.3. There's a lot of competition between them. For me, I try to do the best that I can. Usually, I do pretty well.

A few students mentioned that competition depended on the subject matter:

EH Is there much competition at your school?

12: I guess it could depend on what kind of classes you're taking, because, like for me, math, I don't feel that I know what I'm doing. I don't know whether it might be because of the way the teacher is teaching me or maybe I'm just not grasping, but, like in English, I feel that I'm like way up ahead of the other students.

Some students stopped competing at all if they were losing out, that is, if they fell outside of the optimal level of challenge:

32: I thought I was in the running, but I saw how my grades were going so I kind of got discouraged, but among some other peers of mine I noticed that they were trying to be in the race to see who was higher and every grading period they would compare and checking and things like that. So there was competition.

A student at a private school said it was discouraging to be in the middle of the pack:

1: Oh yeah. There's a lot of competition. . . . I was like in between. There was no way I could get up to the best. . . . That's back in '93. I was like number 50 or something. It was tough like being ranked 50.

Benefits of Competition

From the students' perspectives, competition was generally beneficial. One benefit was that students claimed that it pushed them to do better. For example, Jelani Smith, at a nearly all Black school, said:

23: In a way you end up being pushed somewhat indirectly. Because you always want to be as good or better than the next person that you know that's right next to you, as far as the grades. Because we're all in the boat. Most of our classes, we're together. And so then if they get an A, then you want to make sure you get an A to make sure you stay within — most of the time you put more pressure on yourself and the teachers really don't throw any added pressure, for the most part.

Samuel Jackson also stated that competition helped his performance by encouraging him to strive:

39 There was a group of students who, I'd say, competing. I made everything into a competition cause that's how I keep my drive going. So, I would like subconsciously be competing against everyone. There was always, you always had a few people there, Calvin Frazier, Crystal Jones, Rochelle Brock, just, I can say about 20 other students in my class who were on the same academic level who maybe did almost the same amount of activities I did or things like that. We often competed against each other, not openly and outly, but more or less I think that everyone was sort of striving to take a step over each other. That helped in my success.

Another student (3) said that competition was good for motivation and compared it to a race. He though it was good for most people, though he admitted there were a few "bad seeds" who would do anything for a higher grade. Other students called competition "healthy" and "good."

Selena Sanders thought that school would be boring without competition to provide a goal:

25: Just keeps my adrenaline pumping. I mean, I need something to shoot for. If I know I want to be better or I want to do better, then I have to have something to shoot for. The person just happened to be Janelle, so I'm like, "Okay, I've got to get her, got to get her." That was one of my goals. Didn't reach it, but I was close.

Int: Uh-huh. So, why not make your goal to learn the content really well?

25: Oh, because that was the easy part.

Int: Learning the content?

25: Right.

Int: Go on.

25: Oh! That was the easy part of the whole ordeal. The most difficult part was seeing whose numbers — whose GPA, that's what I call numbers — were the best.

Int: Don't you think that sometimes someone could get really good numbers but not understand the content?

25: Yeah, but that wasn't my problem for them. My problem was — see, I already knew what I knew. So, I just had to get the numbers, the GPA, so I was just worried about GPA. After a while — I think my most difficult year was my sophomore year, anyway, and that's really fundamentals. After freshman and sophomore year, you're starting to learn more fundamentals but they just like branch off of each other. It's like repetitive after a minute. You learn the same thing about Christopher Columbus. In English, you go through all the grammar and all the juxtaposition, personification. You go through all that again. So, that's no problem.

Int: So, you don't think you were learning new stuff throughout high school?

25: In chemistry I was. Chemistry and math kept going, because I went all the way up to calculus and that kicked my butt. Chemistry was very difficult and calculus, but the other classes were more repetitive.

Int: Do you remember what grade you got in calculus or chemistry?

25: Overall?

Int: Yeah.

AC: A C in chemistry, and I had a B or B- in calculus.

Competition to be Valedictorian at a Nearly All Black School

Some of the most interesting stories we heard were recounted by four different students regarding competition to be valedictorian at a nearly all Black school. According to one student, a curious scenario occurred in 3 consecutive years: each year it appeared obvious who was going to be valedictorian, but then a Black junior female who had a high GPA decided to graduate early. We happened to interview two students who were affected in 2 different years. One would have been salutatorian and other valedictorian. Both were hurt and annoyed. Selena Sanders provided the following account:

25: My friend and I, we were neck and neck for who was going to be valedictorian.

Int: Now, who was that?

25: Tameshia Betz. She goes to State University. We were neck and neck on who was going to be valedictorian until we got to the second semester of our senior year, and a junior decided to graduate early. That just knocked us both down. So, I was third, and Tameshia was second, and the girl that graduated early was first.

Int: Now, who's that?

25: Rebecca O'Neal.

Int: So, she should have been in the . . . ?

25: Class of '95.

Int: Instead of '94.

25: Correct.

Int: Is that right? Now, had something similar happened the year before?

25: It's happened three years in a row.

Int: That somebody graduated early?

25: Uh-huh.

Int: Now, is there some advantage to graduating early in terms of your GPA? I mean, did they graduate early in order to be valedictorian, do you think?

25: She did. The girl who graduated in '94, that's the only reason she did it. Well, that's not the only reason. She was pregnant, and she had to leave, so she graduated early.

Int: So, if she waited another year, the competition would have been tougher?

25: For Tameshia and I?

Int: No, for the girl who graduated early?

25: Oh, yes. She would have been fourth or somewhere around there.

Int: So, she knew who the competition was?

25: Oh, she knew. She knew all the numbers. We were like tenths apart, so I was like a 4-point. Tameshia had like a 4.02, and Rebecca had a 4.3 or 4.1, but there were three people in the Class of '95 that have 4.2's. The girl that is first in the Class of '95 has a 4.3.

Int: Now, who's that?

25: Samantha White. She'll be the valedictorian this year.

Nikki Dryden recounted the same scenario from the year before, when the situation was so volatile that it split the school in controversy and was taken before the school board.

24: I was Salutatorian, which is second, and there was a junior who graduated Valedictorian 'cause she graduated early. So there were like—

Int: Who was that?

24: Kim Pettit. And there was a lot of competition there. And among like the top five or six people, because when she came everyone was kind of knocked down.

Int: Where did she come from?

24: She's been there at our school, I believe.

Int: So what do you mean, when she came?

24: When she decided to graduate early. She came from junior class and graduated senior class. She was supposed to have graduated this year [1994]; she graduated last year. So everyone was kind of upset about that and everyone was trying very hard to beat her. Actually senior year is too late to start—

Int: So when she sort of announced that she was going to graduate early, did she know how this would affect other people?

24: Oh, I'm sure. Yeah I think so. She just wanted to graduate, get out I guess. . . .

Int: How did you know what her grades were? I mean there can only be competition if people know what other people's grades are, right?

24: Right. Basically from the Honor Roll list. You know the honor roll, and it was basically you knew the people — everyone knew each other so you would just ask. People didn't have a problem with telling you what they got. . . .

Int: Who else was in the competition?

24: It was a guy named TJ Samuelson; he was third so he would have been Salutatorian if she hadn't have graduated. Lynn Shane, she was at the top.

Jelani Smith (23), who was competing for Valedictorian for 1995, was also interviewed. He said he was competing with Samantha White. Both their fathers were pastors, and he said that the 2 pastors were best friends and made frequent jokes about their children's competition. Keep in mind that this high level of competition for grades and recognition occurred at a predominantly Black inner-city high school among both males and females.

Private Schools

Students in private schools and one predominantly White school generally reported higher academic demands and more difficult competition for grades despite the higher standards. Several of the students had gone to a private school from public or vice versa, and generally there was no question in their minds that the private schools were more academically challenging. For example, a girl who attended an expensive private school stated:

13: Freshman year, I had a very rocky start. I've had to play catch up because the educational background I had from kindergarten to eighth grade was nowhere near, *nowhere near*, the background that is expected of you freshman year at my school. It was just almost impossible.

Vicious Competition?

Nearly all students reported that competition was good natured and friendly and never of a the sort where students would try to undermine other students' achievement. For example, a student (7) at a private girls' school admitted competing for and comparing grades, but stated "They don't try to bring you down at all." However, sometimes it sounded as though students could get testy. Tiffany Reed said the following:

20: We tell each other and like if you get a good grade and somebody else doesn't they — let's say I got an A on my last test and you got a B, we're going to rub it in your face and make — we push each other to try harder by rubbing it in their face.

Int: How do you rub it in?

20: Constantly. And they're sitting here "Well why did I get a — I got an A." "But I got a B and I studied." "But I got an A." And maybe that person that person that got the A didn't study whatsoever. And so it's just like we constantly just keep bringing it up, bringing it up, bringing it up. And you'll get sick of hearing it.

Int: Like for several days or just for several times in a single day?

20: It's usually like several times in one day. But then like one day you could just be on a totally different subject, then the one person will remember it and be like "well I got an A on my last test."

Jelani Smith, who had very high grades, reported that when he did not get a high grade, he was teased by other students.

23: It's a competition as far as Valedictorian and then it's competition because people in the regular class, that usually get lower grades than you, when they get a higher grade than you, they flaunt it. But a lot of times it'll be like, well okay, ain't no big deal. It was just one grade or whatever. But sometimes they'll get on your nerves and they'll beat you and then they'll keep saying it and then you have to remind them sometimes, "now this time, look at your grade and look at mine."

One of the few negative comments regarding competition came from a student at a private school:

2: Well I study with friends or groups occasionally, not very often. As a matter of fact, most people at the school don't study with groups very often because people are very selfish and competition—it even goes home as far as school work. A lot of people don't want to help other people because they're trying to do better.

GT: You, as well?

2: Well sometimes, yeah.

GT: If somebody says "Dave, we know you understand this. Could you help me out with this math problem?"

2: Well, I would usually help the people. But sometimes I won't.

A Mexican American student at a private boys school also had observed negative competitive behavior:

6: I know kids who have 4.0's who fight for that. If they got a 92.49, they'll fight for that extra half percent just to get that A- and then they'll still be mad cause they had an A-. It's a lot of pressure on students, not a lot, mostly from parents and teachers. Not from student to student. But sometimes there is. I know 4.0 students that they'll start arguing on the smallest things because they think they're smarter than the other and they'll just go off on each other and these would be best friends afterwards. They'll be best friends before and

best friends afterwards. But during that time, they'll act like they were sworn enemies since they were born.

When asked whether parents and instructors perpetuated this attitude, he responded: "Mostly by alumni parents. They want their sons to do what they did. And students who know teachers personally, stuff like that. They want to impress them. That's how they do it."

Competition occasionally became quite personal. Daniel Smothers (37) attended the same school as Samuel Jackson (39) and mentioned that he competed with Samuel because he was also in EXCEL and also because he had a bit of a grudge that went way back.

37: Samuel was always trying to outdo everybody. Every little comment is such and such. It's like sit down and shut up forever. And then when he's wrong he still uh uh. It was so irritating. And then he was getting straight A's so I guess it was good. . . . He lived down the street from me and when I first met him we were friends but, he, well, he kind of stole my best friend, my best friend for years from elementary school on up. Started hanging around him and sort of left me so that was a reason why I didn't like him. And then when we got in EXCEL, it was like, oh God, Samuel, who thought he was a Mr. Know It All, that's all he ever did was try to be Mr. Know It All. So I never really cared for him but he was all right.

Int: Did you try to beat him?

37: Well it depended on — all right, well in certain classes, no. Like we were in American Government, Samuel was in there. Samuel did this, Samuel did that. He was probably more successful 'cause he probably got an A and I probably got a B. But when we got in English AP, I was more successful because I came into that class two weeks after it started and everybody else was in there and Samuel "I'm the little smart Black guy in here and there's some other people but I'm going to be the smart one and Ms. Dexter's going to call on me. I know this and I know that." Well, when I got in there and we started our little writings and having to write all these essays, suddenly somebody had a knack for writing and somebody didn't. And so it was like every time I was asked to read my paper—I was gettin' A's on all my papers on writing and Samuel was the one struggling.

It is interesting to note that when Ms. Dexter was interviewed, she remembered both students well and reported that Samuel was not struggling and was clearly the better student. Thus competition appears to provide a motive for constructing a personally enhancing memory.

Distinguishing Grades from Learning

Motivation research has shown that students who hold competitive or ego goals tend to study more superficially and to avoid challenge. A few students were asked whether the focus on competition detracted from their learning. Generally, they denied that possibility, and some did not seem to able to distinguish grades from learning. Samuel (39) did not think that competition made

him superficial in his studies. In fact, he described competition that is based on one-upmanship in social situations (rather than in grades) and that requires sufficient understanding to challenge someone. He said that in case of a debate, he wanted to fare well in the "battle of wits." Selena said that in high school, the learning as the easy part and competing for grades was the hard part, but that learning the content in college was more difficult than in high school; nevertheless, the emphasis on scores over learning was the same. For example, Selena described her chemistry instructor:

25: She would compare you to the average in the class. Every time I talked to her, it was, "Well, the class average on this test was a 73, and you got a 52." So, it hasn't changed for me at all.

Int: What hasn't changed?

25: The statistics and the numbers, talking about GPA's and where the grades are and where you are. It hasn't changed for me at all, because that's all it's about really. It's about who has the better grades. It's about who you know, first of all. It's not about what you know. You can know it if you want to. It will help you later, but if you don't know it right now, if you get a GPA, you'll be fine. You know? Really, that's all it is — about the numbers. The professors, in a way, this is any school, I think. They really do care if you know it or not, but if you don't, you better get the better grade.

A student with outstanding grades and standardized test scores did not find much that she wanted to learn in high school:

Int: Are there classes that you really want to learn the material in order to learn the material?

9: Uh-huh.

Int: What would some of those be?

9: This year, none of them. I don't have very good classes this year. Freshman year, it was Ancient World History. I liked that. Last year, it was Psychology. I took AP Psychology at St. Francis, so that's the first time I really was in a co-ed class in three years. I really liked that.

Int: . . . You mentioned world history. It sounded like there might have been some others What were others?

9: No, not really. English, I liked English class.

Int: Okay. Why?

9: I just like to read, and that's it. We have good discussions in our English classes. . . .

Int: So, it doesn't sound like you view high school classes as that useful, as far as learning material?

9: Well, if it's a good class, but I don't know. I don't like my classes this year.

Int: Why?

9: I don't know. They're boring. Really boring.

Int: What's the most boring?

9: Calculus. I hate that class.

Int: Why are you taking it?

9: Because I have to take it for college anyway.

Of course the degree to which learning and grades coincide depends largely upon the type of assessment that is used. Maritza, a young Mexican American woman who had largely given up competing because her grades were not good enough, thought that in her AP classes grades accurately reflected learning.

Int: But why care about the grade? Why not care about the learning?

15: Well, like in the classes I take, if you get a good grade, you've learned something because the honor classes aren't just like, "Read this and answer this question. You got an A." You have to read it, understand it, to be able to answer the question in the first place.

Int: So, you think the assessment, the test, is a different sort of test?

15: Yeah. Like I have an AP European history class. Every test is you have to write two essays. To be able to write an essay, you have to know the material. You can't write a paper without knowing what you're talking about.

Discussion

Many laypersons tend to view competition as a good and natural motivating factor. Motivation researchers, on the other hand, have tended to portray competition and social comparison as a negative aspect of schooling. In this study, we investigated the perceptions of students, specifically students of color. Students of color are particularly interesting with regard to competition because they have sometimes been portrayed as rejecting academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), and because national data on grades, standardized test scores, and dropping out suggest they are less likely to compete successfully. While motivation research has emphasized the deleterious effects of competition, students in our study generally thought it was

beneficial. Some even liked it. Those who liked it tended to be those who were winning, of course.

A primary concern for educators should be the way that students focus on grades rather than learning. It seems that teachers did little to communicate to students why it would be useful to learn the material that they were teaching. The students who were interviewed generally had little to say about the content of their classes or its usefulness. On the other hand, teachers and administrators were apparently doing many things to suggest that grades were as important if not more important than learning. A salient example was posting the honor roll in order of GPA.

As long as there is any basis for comparison, students seem likely to compete spontaneously. However, the competition can be debilitating for students who do not fare well. An important point is that the negative aspects of competition may occur even for students who are doing well if they compare themselves with students who consistently do better then them. Daniel Smothers was clearly "irked" by his poor showing in the competition with Samuel Jackson; when Samuel listed students he competed with, he did not even mention Daniel. Daniel was clearly proud of his perceived prowess in English class that allowed him, he believed, to shine above Samuel. Nikki had competed successfully, she thought, until a junior beat her out for valedictorian, which turned her moment of triumph into a sort of defeat over which she had no control. This study tends to support the assertion of Nicholls and others that competitive ego orientations may not harm those with high perceptions of ability, but across situations and across time, competitive ego orientations seem likely to do more harm than good. An implication for schools is that they should avoid emphasizing bases for social comparison like class rankings and posted grades. However, it is important to note that for some high achieving students, elimination of grade comparison might eliminate one of their few sources of enjoyment in school. It might be a mistake to eliminate bases for social comparison while leaving courses, from the students' perspectives, equally boring and divorced from issues of personal relevance.

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Table 1. Information About Student Respondents

	Ethnicity	Gender	Comp-etition in School	Partici pate in compe tition	High School	Year in school	EXCEL?	High School Cumulati ve GPA
1.	Filipino	M	Y	N	C. boys mostly White	First year college		2.660
2.	Afr Amer	M	Y	Y	C. boys mostly White	HS Senior		3.100
3.	Mixed	M	Y	Y	C. boys mostly White	HS Junior		3.470
4.	Hispanic	M	Y	---	C. boys mostly White	HS Senior		3.583
5.	Afr Amer	M	Y	---	C. boys mostly White	HS Senior		4.420
6.	Hispanic	M	Y	---	C. boys mostly White	HS Senior		3.156
7.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	C. girls mostly White	HS Senior		2.200
8.	Afr Amer	F	Y	---	C. girls mostly White	HS Senior	N	2.184
9.	Afr Amer	F	Y	N	C. girls mostly White	HS Jr & Sr		4.184
10.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	C. girls mostly White	HS Junior		3.651
11.	Afr Amer	F	Y	2 of 4 yrs	C. girls mostly White	HS Senior	N	2.794
12.	Afr Amer	F	depends	---	C. integrated coed	HS Senior		2.615
13.	Mixed	F	Y	N	Private mostly White	HS Senior		NA
14.	Hispanic	F	N	N	Public mostly White	HS Junior		2.710
15.	Hispanic	F	Y	Not anym ore	Public mostly White	HS Senior		2.732
16.	Mixed	M	N	N	Public mostly White	HS Senior		4.075
17.	Afr Amer	F	Y	used to	Public mostly White	HS Senior		3.783
18.	Afr Amer	F	---	N	Public mostly White	HS Senior		2.265
19.	Afr Amer	F	Y	N	Public mostly White	HS Senior		3.421
20.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public mostly White	HS Senior		3.560
21	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public mostly White	HS Senior		2.730
22.	Mixed	F	Y	Y	Public mostly White to C. integrated coed	HS Junior		3.800
23.	Afr Amer	M	Y	Y	Public nearly all Black	HS Junior		4.169
24.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public nearly all Black	First year college		3.735
25.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public nearly all Black	First year college	N	4.000
26.	Afr Amer	M	Y	---	Public nearly all Black	HS Senior	N	2.695
27.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public nearly all Black	First year college		3.114
28.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public nearly all Black	HS Senior	N	3.837
29.	Mixed	M	Y	Y	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	N	3.777
30.	Afr Amer	F	Y	---	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	N	2.243
31.	Afr Amer	M	Y	---	Public racially balanced	First year college		3.489
32.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	N	2.720
33.	Afr Amer	M	Y	Y	Public racially balanced	HS Senior		2.878
34.	Afr Amer	M	Y	Y	Public racially balanced	HS Junior		2.886
35.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public racially balanced	First year college		2.852
36.	Afr Amer	M	Y	---	Public racially balanced	First year college		3.004
37.	Afr Amer	M	Y	Y	Public racially balanced	First year college		3.067
38.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	N	3.478
39.	Afr Amer	M	Y	Y	Public racially balanced	First year college		4.018

40.	Afr Amer	F	Y	Y	Public racially balanced	HS Junior		4.100
41.	Hispanic	F	sort of	N	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	N	2.482

Note. Afr Am = African American. Mex Am = Mexican American. HS = high school. GPA = grade point average. M = male. F = Female. --- = not asked that question directly. C. = Catholic. Students were in EXCEL unless "No" indicated in EXCEL? column. "Public mostly white schools" had a significant minority of students of color. NA = Not available.